

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 148 184

FL 009 175

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TITLE A Language Background Questionnaire for the Bilingual Child.
PUB DATE 77
NOTE 21p.; Appendix contains small type
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Bilingualism; *Bilingual Students; Child Language; Cultural Factors; Demography; *Family Environment; Language Development; *Language Role; Language Tests; *Language Usage; Minority Group Children; *Questionnaires; Scoring; Social Factors; Sociocultural Patterns; Socioeconomic Influences; Sociolinguistics; Test Reliability

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a "Language Background Questionnaire" designed for use in gathering information on the home linguistic environment of bilingual children. The questionnaire probes a series of demographic and environmental variables which define a bilingual child's sociolinguistic milieu. Instructions are given for calculating the overall respective language use in the home as well as language specifically directed to and from the child in terms of the mean language input and the mean language output. Questionnaire scoring is arranged for easy adaptation to computer programs. A reliability check found the method of self-report used in the questionnaire to be 75% reliable. The questionnaire is appropriate for use by both researchers and educators in studying and evaluating language development in bilingual children. (Author)

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A LANGUAGE BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE
FOR THE BILINGUAL CHILD

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Abstract

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This paper presents a "Language Background Questionnaire" designed by the author for use in gathering information on the home linguistic environment of bilingual children. The questionnaire probes a series of demographic and environmental variables which define a bilingual child's sociolinguistic milieu. Instructions are given for calculating the overall respective language use in the home as well as language specifically directed to and from the child in terms of the mean language input and the mean language output. Questionnaire scoring is arranged for easy adaptation to computer programs. A reliability check found the method of self-report used in the questionnaire to be 75% reliable. The questionnaire is appropriate for use by both researchers and educators in studying and evaluating language development in bilingual children.

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A LANGUAGE BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE BILINGUAL CHILD

In recent years increasing attention has been given to the need to evaluate the language abilities of minority children as they enter the public school system in order to place them in the best possible learning situation. To this end, there has been a proliferation of new bilingual testing materials. What has been neglected, however, is the development of tools for exploring the bilingual child's home linguistic environment. The latter approach complements the former by providing insight into the nature of the child's exposure to the two languages and by helping to answer the sociolinguistic question of who speaks what to whom, when, where, how and why in the bilingual home.

This paper presents a "Language Background Questionnaire" (Appendix A) designed to investigate a series of demographic and environmental variables which define a bilingual child's linguistic and sociolinguistic milieu. The questionnaire, first fielded in a study of 43 Spanish/English bilingual preschool children (Redlinger 1977), was based partially on the results of an earlier study by the author on maternal language (Redlinger 1976). It differs from other available language background questionnaires in various ways. Hoffman's (1934) language background questionnaire was designed to be administered directly to school children and includes several items inapplicable to the preschool child. The present questionnaire

is directed to the mother or caretaker of the child and can be used for gathering home background information on both preschool and school aged children. The Skoczylas' (1971) questionnaire has employed the dyadic procedure for investigating home bilingual usage, but the relative amount of time spent with the child by the various interlocutors is not taken into consideration. The present questionnaire also uses dyad analysis and, in addition, records time spent with the child giving a weighted value for each dyad. Scoring of the questionnaire has been designed for easy adaptation to computer analysis.

Calculating Home Language Use. For purposes of scoring the "home language use" section of the questionnaire, the caretaker is asked questions of the model: "Which language do/does _____ use more with _____, Spanish, English, or both languages equally?" She is then asked to estimate the time each person spends with the child based on a 12-hour waking day. The "home language use" section is divided into three parts for mathematical calculations: (1) "language input" or language spoken to the child, (2) "language output" or language spoken by the child, and (3) "background noise" or language spoken between family members in which the child is not directly involved.

The mean language input (MLI) is calculated for each child by: (1) multiplying the number of hours daily the child spends with a given person by the number (n) assigned from the five-point scale indicating respective language spoken to the child by that person, (2) summing the products from all applicable dyads, and (3) dividing the sum by the total number of hours spent with the child by all persons.

$$MLI = \frac{\sum(n \times \text{hrs.})}{\text{total hrs.}}$$

The mean language output (MLO) is calculated for each child by: (1) multiplying the number of hours daily the child spends with a given person by the number (n) assigned from the five-point scale indicating respective language spoken by the child to that person, (2) summing the products from all applicable dyads, and (3) dividing by the total number of hours spent with the child by all persons.

$$MLO = \frac{\sum(n \times \text{hrs.})}{\text{total hrs.}}$$

The background noise(BGN) is calculated for each child by summing the numbers from the five-point scale (n) indicating respective language use of all dyads not involving the child and dividing by the number of applicable dyads (N).

$$BGN = \frac{\sum n}{N \text{ dyads}}$$

Situational Contexts. Another unique component of the present "Language Background Questionnaire" is the section on "situational contexts." This part of the questionnaire has been field tested twice--first during a pilot study involving 25 mothers (Redlinger 1976) and again in a later study involving 43 mothers (Redlinger 1977). The distribution of respective language use in the situational contexts for both studies exhibited similar patterns. Both Figures 1 and 2 indicate a decided tendency for bilingual mothers to scold in Spanish. Likewise, the

two studies illustrate an ordered diminishing use of Spanish in the situational contexts of consoling, praising and labeling. An interesting difference between Figure 1 and 2 was the predominant use of English in the praising situation by the 43 mothers of the later study. In fact, in all situations the amount of English used was greater than that of the pilot study. This trend coincided with the overall language use of the 43 mothers in the later study being more toward English whereas, among the 25 pilot study mothers, the orientation was more toward Spanish.

Reliability. An important concern when considering data collection by questionnaire is reliability. Self-report, the method used in this questionnaire, has been both criticized and defended. It has been remarked that, "The relationship between self-report and reality is notoriously unreliable" (Kelly 1967:225). To the contrary, John Macnamara has stated that the reliability is generally quite high with regard to questionnaires which ". . . require the subject to estimate the extent to which each of his languages is used in the home" (Macnamara 1967:61).

The reliability of the present questionnaire was checked during the study which first fielded the questionnaire (Redlinger 1977). Seven mothers or approximately 16 percent of the 43 mothers of a subject population were interviewed a second time from 6 to 14 weeks after the initial home interview. The average span of time between the two interviews was 9 weeks. The parts of the questionnaire asking for basic demographic information and those probing language attitudes and loyalty were not administered the second time. Questioning began with the "language fluency" section and continued through the "situational contexts" section. The resulting question responses were divided into four categories for analysis:

(1) family fluency and daily language use, (2) home language dyad patterns, (3) general environment, and (4) situational contexts. The number of items pertaining to each subject family were summed for each category and totaled. The number of items to which the mother changed her response at the second interview was similarly summed and totaled. The percent reliability for each of the maternal reports was determined by calculating the percent of the total number of response changes divided by the total items pertaining and subtracting that value from 100 percent.

$$\% \text{ reliability} = 100\% - \left[\frac{\text{response changes}}{\text{items pertaining}} \right] \times 100$$

The reliability check of maternal responses revealed on the average a 75 percent reliability (Table 1). Although no clear-cut patterns emerge as to which sections were more susceptible to response change, it can be observed by comparing the total average percent of change for each of the four question types that responses to questions on the general environment section were changed least often (20.2%) and that responses to questions on the language use by dyad section were changed most often (30.0%). It is not surprising that the greatest variation occurred in the section of dyads, since each dyad analysis was based on a five-point scale. In fact, most response changes were to an adjacent point on the scale, e.g., a mother reporting at the first interview that she speaks more Spanish than English to her child might report at the second interview that she speaks an equal amount of both languages to the child (a change from a "2" to a "3" score on the five-point scale.) The general

environment section, on the other hand, was based on a three-point scale where differences were more clear-cut.

Application. The "Language Background Questionnaire" herein presented has several potential applications. When utilized in field studies of developmental bilingualism, it can be a powerful tool for acquiring information on the sociolinguistic dimensions present. Furthermore, if home language background information can be gathered periodically during longitudinal studies and all environmental changes carefully recorded, sociolinguistic influences on language development can be more adequately traced and analyzed. In a study of 43 bilingual preschool children (Redlinger 1977) the questionnaire was used to collect sociolinguistic data on each child who was also tested for relative language ability. The computer was then used to analyze which demographic and environmental variables were associated with three bilingual conditions within the subject population: Spanish dominance, English dominance and balanced bilingualism. In addition, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and multiple range tests determined whether or not there was a significant relationship between any given sociolinguistic variable and high or low scores on language performance tests.

The home language background analysis can also be extremely useful to educators in evaluating a bilingual child's respective language capacities and potentials when he first enters school. When a home language measure is used in conjunction with formal language dominance tests or other bilingual measures, a more detailed and complete linguistic picture emerges of the child. Many children entering school for the first

time are too shy to respond in a formal or even in an informal testing situation. An investigation of the home language background of such children is particularly important since formal testing data for them is not readily attainable. In addition, a knowledge of a child's home language background can make teachers more aware of the kind of linguistic environment the child is experiencing in the home and thus aid them in achieving greater continuity in guiding the child's overall development.

Many sociolinguistic parameters play an active role in language learning. Perhaps the present "Language Background Questionnaire" may serve as a useful tool with which researchers and educators can investigate the home linguistic environment as they continue to study and evaluate the bilingual child's language development.

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Table 1. Information concerning reliability of mothers' self-reported responses to the "Language Background Questionnaire."

	Interview Dates		Question Types				Percent Reliability
	1st	2nd	Family fluency and use	Dyads	General Environment	Situational Contexts	Total
Case No. 3	2/17	6/2					
Items pertaining			8	24	18	10	60
Response change			1	4	3	2	10
Percent change			12.5	16.7	16.7	20.0	16.7
							83.3
Case No. 11	3/2	6/2					
Items pertaining			6	12	18	10	46
Response change			3	4	3	6	16
Percent change			50.0	33.4	16.7	60.0	34.8
							65.2
Case No. 20	3/22	6/1					
Items pertaining			8	14	18	10	50
Response change			2	4	3	4	13
Percent change			25.0	28.6	16.7	40.0	26.0
							74.0
Case No. 22	3/23	6/3					
Items pertaining			4	12	17	5	38
Response change			0	5	3	0	8
Percent change			0.0	41.7	17.7	0.0	21.1
							78.9
Case No. 23	3/29	5/27					
Items pertaining			6	29	17	5	58
Response change			1	7	3	2	13
Percent change			16.7	24.2	17.7	40.0	22.5
							77.5

Table 1. (continued)

	Interview Dates		Question Types				Percent Reliability
	1st	2nd	Family fluency and use	Dyads	General Environment	Situational Contexts	Total
Case No. 28	4/8	6/3					
Items pertaining			3	22	18	10	58
Response change			4	10	3	1	18
Percent change			50.0	45.5	16.7	10.0	31.1
Case No. 36	5/8	6/22					
Items pertaining			8	20	18	10	56
Response change			0	4	7	1	12
Percent change			0.0	20.0	38.9	10.0	21.5
Total Average Percent of Change			22.0	30.0	20.2	25.8	
Overall Percent Reliability							75.2

LEGEND FOR FIGURES

- Fig. 1. Pilot study of 25 mothers' self-reported language distribution in overall home use and in four situational contexts.
- Fig. 2. Later study of 43 mothers' self-reported language distribution in overall home use and in four situational contexts.

Fig. 1

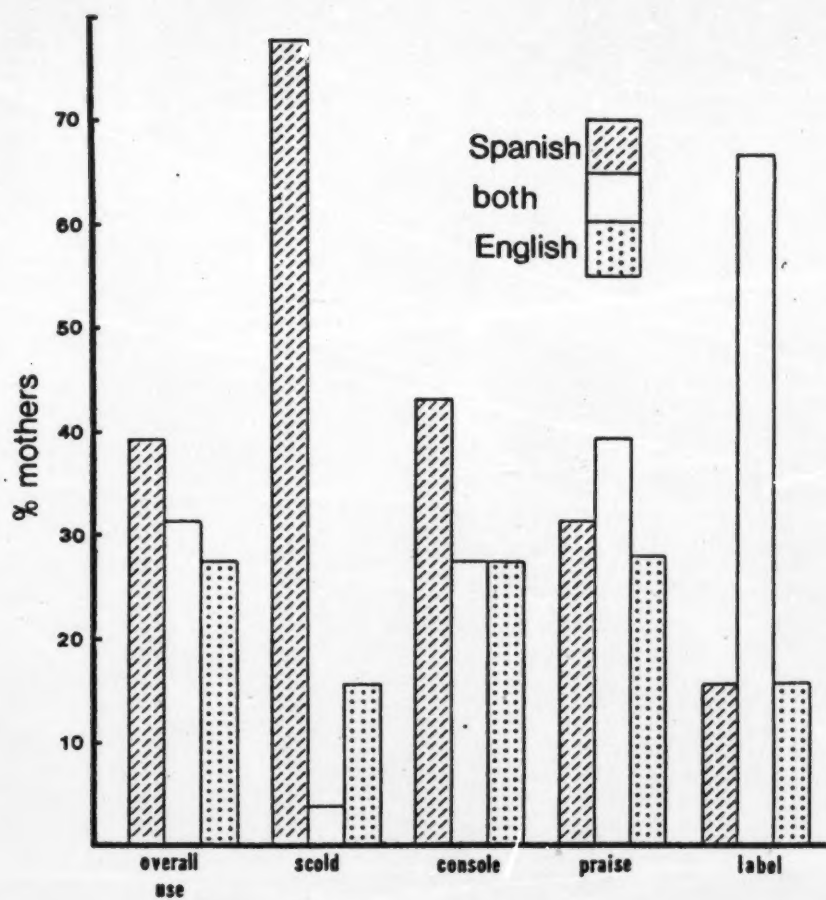
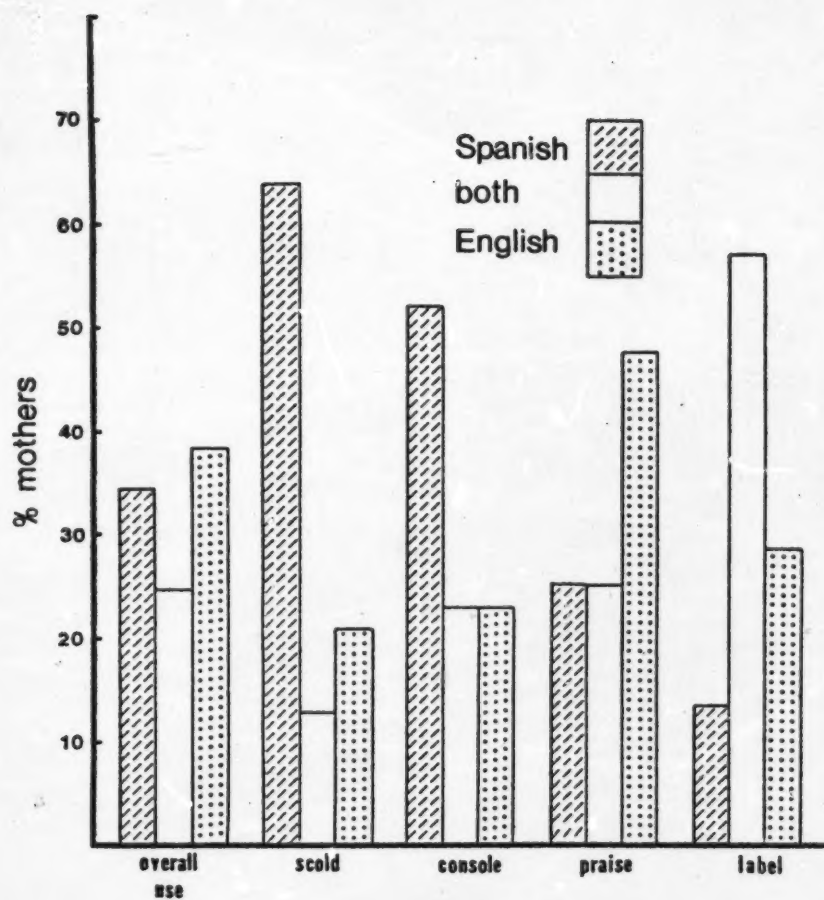


Fig. 2



LANGUAGE BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

	<u>Mother</u>	<u>Father</u>
Birthplace	_____	_____
Years in U. S.	_____	_____
Generation	_____	_____
Education	_____	_____
Employment	_____	_____
Read and write English	_____	_____
Read and write Spanish	_____	_____
Where learned English	_____	_____

Household Members _____

Ages of Children _____ Child care _____

Language Fluency: Mother _____ Father _____

Older Siblings _____ Child _____

Language spoken more during average day: Mother _____

Father _____ Older Siblings _____ Child _____

<u>Home Language Use</u> ^a	<u>Score</u>	<u>Time Daily with Child (Hours)</u>
Mother to child	_____	_____
Child to mother	_____	_____
Father to child	_____	_____
Child to father	_____	_____
Older siblings to child	_____	_____
Child to older siblings	_____	_____
Younger siblings to child	_____	_____

a. Score: 1 -- only Spanish, 2 -- mostly Spanish, some English, 3 -- equal amounts of both languages, 4 -- mostly English, some Spanish, and 5 -- only English.

Home Language Use

Child to younger siblings _____

Grandmother to child _____

Child to grandmother _____

Grandfather to child _____

Child to grandfather _____

Babysitter to child _____

Child to babysitter _____

_____ to child _____

Child to _____ _____

_____ to child _____

Child to _____ _____

Cousins to child _____

Child to cousins _____

Playmates to child _____

Child to playmates _____

Background

Mother to father _____

Father to mother _____

Mother to older siblings _____

Older siblings to mother _____

Father to older siblings _____

Older siblings to father _____

Mother to younger siblings _____

Younger siblings to mother _____

Father to younger siblings _____

Younger siblings to father _____

Older siblings to each other _____

Time Daily with Child (Hours)

APPENDIX A

14

<u>General Environment</u>	Never	Sometimes	Often
Child played ^a with in Spanish	_____	_____	_____
Child played with in English	_____	_____	_____
Child read to in Spanish	_____	_____	_____
Child read to in English	_____	_____	_____
Child hears radio programs in Spanish	_____	_____	_____
Child hears radio programs in English	_____	_____	_____
Child watches T.V. programs in Spanish	_____	_____	_____
Child watches T.V. programs in English	_____	_____	_____
Child watches bilingual programs	_____	_____	_____
Child plays alone	_____	_____	_____
Child talks to himself in Spanish	_____	_____	_____
Child talks to himself in English	_____	_____	_____
Language mixing in mother's speech	_____	_____	_____
Language mixing in father's speech	_____	_____	_____
Language mixing in child's speech	_____	_____	_____
	None	Some	Many
Books in Spanish in home	_____	_____	_____
Books in English in home	_____	_____	_____
Magazines in Spanish in home	_____	_____	_____
Magazines in English in home	_____	_____	_____
<u>Situational Contexts</u> ^b	Mother	Father	
Scolding	_____	_____	
Consoling	_____	_____	
Praising	_____	_____	
Labeling	_____	_____	
Explaining	_____	_____	

a. singing, story telling, nursery rhymes, etc.
b. Score: 1 -- Spanish, 2 -- either language, 3 -- English.

Preschool experience: _____ Where _____

When _____ Ethnic Composition _____

Children speak _____ Teachers speak _____

At what age did child become aware of speaking two distinct languages?

Does the child know any monolinguals?

Is being bilingual an advantage or a disadvantage? Why?

Is bilingual education a good or a bad idea? Why?

Which language, Spanish or English, is more difficult to learn? Why?

What is your opinion of Mexican-Americans who do not teach their children Spanish? . . . English?

Did you have any problems learning English? What kind?

Did you have any problems in school due to language difficulties?